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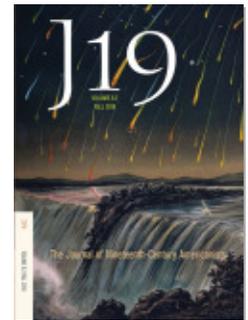
The Ambivalent Pleasure of Teaching Early American  
Literature in a Prison

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## The Ambivalent Pleasure of Teaching Early American Literature in a Prison

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My favorite writer is Herman Melville. It would be difficult for me to articulate all of the reasons why, but I think part of it is that I identify with the flawed nature of his protagonists. I think of them as desperate to latch on to some form of tangible, fulfilling truth in this fleeting and chaotic life. At the same time, their quixotic quests and the postures they affect when puffed up with the profundity of their epic endeavors can render them ever so slightly clownish.

Perhaps my favorite example of this sort of Melvillian protagonist is Tommo from *Typee*. Fed up with the privation of the seemingly interminable voyage of the *Dolly* and the tyranny of Captain Vangs, Tommo heroically escapes from the whale ship into the depths of the Marquesan jungle with the mysterious Toby. During his brief stay with the Typee, Tommo is afforded a rare opportunity to immerse himself in what he describes as a well-nigh prelapsarian way of life. He waxes rhapsodic about late mornings, leisurely breakfasts, strolls to the local stream to bathe with his island love Fayaway and his “body-servant” Kory-Kory, and amicable rounds of fellowship over a relaxing pipe with his fellow tribesmen. Exotic food seems to drop from the trees, the men of the tribe lounge about “after the style of indolent Romans,” honing their spears or carving designs on canoe paddles, while the young Typee women innocently adorn themselves or dance seductively before the fire. And if the spirit takes them, Tommo tells us, they simply curl up and sleep, for “to many of them . . . life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap.” “In truth,” Tommo avers, “these innocent people seemed to be at no loss for something to occupy their time; and it would be no light

task to enumerate all their employments, or rather pleasures.”<sup>1</sup> Tommo thus finds himself living in an enviable state of seemingly absolute freedom, his days structured by the myriad joys of island life rather than the threatening stressors that he must overcome to survive on his erstwhile ship, or in the “real” world back home. At the same time, however, Tommo’s fantasy of freedom is absurd, predicated on a form of epistemological blindness that makes his “escape” from the pressures of shipboard life yet another form of Western co-optation.

I chose Tommo’s reflections on Polynesian freedom for my primary subject matter when I lectured for the first time last year about early American literature and culture at the William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison near Bessemer, Alabama, about thirty miles west of where I live and work in Birmingham. UAB professors can offer presentations there through a program administered by our Office of Service Learning.<sup>2</sup> I thought the men at Donaldson would find Tommo’s portrayal of his life with the Typee a welcome break from the grind of prison life, and I wanted to hear their insights about Tommo’s inability to live comfortably over time with the Typee. Despite his portrayal of life in the Marquesas as a return to a lost Eden, Tommo nevertheless increasingly feels threatened there, and his “escape” to the whaleship *Julia* is in many ways a deflating return to the very confinement he endured on the *Dolly*. What would they think, I wondered, about this feeling of being threatened by too much freedom, a state of mind that can lead (or so I have heard) to recidivism in our prison populations?

The subject of *Typee* would also give me the chance to discuss Polynesian tattooing. I wanted to see what the men at Donaldson thought of Tommo’s fear of being permanently “disfigured” by the tattoo artist Karky (219), and to perhaps connect that fear to early American theories about race and skin pigmentation.<sup>3</sup> I made hard-copy handouts of passages from *Typee* for the men to read; a PowerPoint presentation consisting of slides showing early nineteenth-century depictions of tattooed Pacific islanders, Polynesian tattoo implements, early etchings of cannibalism, and paintings from a bit later in the nineteenth century illustrating Western fascination with the Pacific islands as a lost Eden (Gauguin, for example, in Tahiti); and finally, several questions for discussion.

Despite what I felt was a solid foundation for my talk, I nevertheless grew increasingly apprehensive about the actual process of going into a prison and facing a group of men who had done violent things and

lived confined and potentially dangerous lives. I had heard about presenting at Donaldson from other faculty who had taught there, and none really mentioned feeling nervous or disturbed at the thought of entering a prison; to the contrary, they usually praised the experience as enormously rewarding and gratifying. But while I knew that it was silly to imagine that something terrible might happen—that I might get trapped, become a hostage, or somehow be mistaken for a prisoner myself—I couldn't shake my anxiety. It didn't help that the first thing the program coordinators send volunteers is a form to sign called the "Prison Rape Elimination Act." It's really just an initiative that says you agree to help "establish a zero-tolerance standard" for sexual assault in Alabama's prisons, and that you believe doing so should be a "top priority," but it doesn't bring peace of mind like I think it's supposed to. All things considered, then, my preparations for my Donaldson lecture were tinged with trepidation, and on the evening of my talk I drove to the prison, not with a pleasant sense of anticipation but rather a vague dread of the unknown.

The Donaldson facility is fairly remote, and while the drive there is not unpleasant—turning onto the wooded road into the grounds reminded me of how it feels to enter a state park—the prison itself is imposing, with bright perimeter lights illuminating the night sky like a fairground. Looped razor wire tops the high fences, and guard towers loom at intervals around the prison yard. The entrance building is a drab, squatty structure, with a metal detector leading through to the prison yard on one side, and a long desk behind a thick glass window on the other. When I arrived, the woman behind the glass greeted me and asked for my identification, took my cell phone, and gave me a badge to wear in return. I was told there was a plumbing issue in the visitor bathroom, which explained the water that oozed onto the floor around my feet while I waited for the guard to take me back to the cell blocks. He finally appeared and waited for me on the other side of the metal detector, then silently led me through two high fenced gates and across the prison yard into the main building. Lectures are held in the visitation room, which looks like a large school cafeteria, with white walls, white tile, and bright fluorescent lights above. Around thirty folding chairs were arranged in rows, and the lecture organizers had booted up a laptop projector for my presentation. After a few minutes the prisoners filed in from a side door, dressed in snow white jumpsuits and white shoes, some carrying notebooks and pens, as a guard watched them take their seats. "All right," he said. "Let's see if we can learn something."

My presentation, I suppose, was a success at some level. The men were generally attentive, asked a few basic questions during and after my talk, and politely thanked me before I left. When I finished I was relieved to have it over with, but as I drove home I had a nagging sense that something had been missing from my talk. It felt strangely watered down and insubstantial; I didn't really interact with the class and consequently couldn't tell whether what I had spoken about made any sort of impression, or whether it was instead merely ninety minutes of time that the men didn't have to spend in their cells. Perhaps more importantly, I didn't ask the questions I had intended to ask. For example, instead of talking openly about tattooing and race, I merely presented it and hurried on to my next talking point. I did the same thing with the topic of Tommo and freedom.

I don't know whether the mediocrity of my presentation was all in my head or whether it truly hadn't been particularly successful. I do know, though, that I could never entirely overcome an uneasy feeling that I had, one that hindered me from fully expressing my feelings about *Typee* and that made me uncomfortable pressing the implications of my lecture, and it was this: I possessed the precious ability to leave when my lecture was over, while they did not, and this sense of privilege was partially enabled by any number of factors—race, class, chance—that were out of our control. This realization made me, I think, overly self-conscious, and despite my efforts to suppress the feeling, I sensed that they might have envied my access to freedom and consequently resented me at some level. My entire talk seemed vaguely superficial or even condescending, as if I weren't fully engaging with the men but lecturing over them. I was reluctant to go off script; I didn't trust the men to appreciate Melville and his cultural milieu in their own way, and consequently I tried too hard to add interesting peripheral bells and whistles. I suddenly felt that my anticipated discussion about Tommo's ambivalence toward freedom was insensitive given that many of the prisoners would never experience even a modicum of freedom again in their lives. It seemed almost impossible to ignore, or to bridge, the gulf that existed between the circumstances of our lives. It wasn't just because I was free and they were not, or because my "expertise" was predicated on a history of privilege. It was also because I allowed myself to fall into a predicament very much like Tommo's in that I was partially blind to the limitations of my own perspective. I saw the men less as individuals than as an exoticized group, my prison lecture as a strange and interesting excursion into foreign territory rather than a genuine effort to reciprocally engage. I

thought again of the Prison Rape Elimination Act form that I received, which for me was an unsettling side note to my upcoming lecture, whereas for the men at Donaldson it was a real intervention into a horrific problem in their daily lives.

I did not come to these realizations about the shortcomings of my first lecture at Donaldson all at once but rather after thinking over my experience during the course of the ensuing year. And when I lectured for the second time there this past fall, I don't know that I really had a solid plan for overcoming issues that may very well be endemic to the situation. Still, I vowed to set aside my apprehensions and dive into my lecture just as I would with my UAB students, making the class more interactive and discussion-oriented, and paying little heed to the real or perceived differences that I felt between me and them. The topic I chose for my second lecture was nineteenth-century temperance literature, which is a central focus of a book I have been working on for a while now about early American literary and cultural portrayals of addiction. In order to facilitate discussion, I arranged to have copies of a temperance-themed novella, Maria Lamas's 1849 *The Glass; or, The Trials of Helen More*, copied and sent to the men several weeks ahead of my talk. Lamas's work is typical of temperance writing in its hypersensationalized portrayal of the ravages of alcohol. (It even advertises itself as a "thrilling temperance tale.") In one harrowing scene, for example, Helen More locks her son away in a closet as punishment, only to forget all about him during a four-day fit of delirium tremens. When she recovers, she finds that he has died, but not before cannibalizing his own arm in a fit of starvation-induced madness. *The Glass* also features a female drunkard, a rarity in the culture of temperance.<sup>4</sup>

This time, I was more comfortable arriving and setting up at the prison, and I allowed myself to feel more confident about my presence as an instructor. I began my lecture with factual information about the temperance movement that I learned from Steven Mintz's book *Moralists and Modernizers*—how much distilled alcohol Americans drank in 1830 (seven gallons a year per capita); how many Americans were enrolled in temperance societies (1.5 million by 1835); some of the societies' names (The American Temperance Union, The Washingtonians, The Sons of Temperance, etc.).<sup>5</sup> We then looked at a number of nineteenth-century images associated with temperance. My favorite is the 1846 Currier and Ives cartoon *The Drunkard's Progress: From the First Glass to the Grave* that exists in several forms, depicting alcohol consumption as a slippery slope, from the first "glass with a Friend" to "Death by



Figure 1. *The Drunkard's Progress*, Currier and Ives, ca. 1846.

suicide.” The road to death is paved with empty bottles, the cartoon suggests; it’s an inescapable arc, beneath which mourns an innocent wife and her child, the patient suffering victims of male dissipation (fig. 1).

I don’t know whether it was because I was more relaxed for my second lecture, or because the men had a text to read beforehand, or simply because the material was more interesting, but this time they actually participated in our discussion and volunteered observations of their own. A tall, bespectacled African American man, for example, raised his hand to point out that the sensationalism of the temperance movement was similar to the demonization of street drugs today. What’s more, he seemed to have found temperance-related materials on his own, because he alluded to T. S. Arthur and to the importance of women to the movement. Another man—older, white, and professorial looking—suggested that the temperance movement was limited by its insistence on portraying alcohol as the cause, rather than a symptom, of a diseased culture, again much like antidrug campaigns today. He seemed more comfortable in the room than the other prisoners, at one point getting up without permission and shuffling to the water fountain for a drink, which provoked several nervous glances from the other men to the guard. Overall, they seemed more receptive to my ideas this time, nodding enthusiastically

when I suggested that the temperance movement was as much about inculcating middle-class ideals as it was about curtailing rampant drinking. We had a lively discussion about how temperance literature maligns male collectivities, idealizing instead privatized heterosexual domestic harmony. They seemed to like this idea and connected it to the way media portrayals of public urban life today accentuate its propensity for violence and cultural breakdown. Of course not every man participated—two younger men in particular kept whispering to each other and giggling and several others stared stone-faced at the wall behind me—but I guess this sort of thing happens in every classroom, and I was pleased that we at least had a genuine discussion.

All things considered, then, my presentation went better this year. When it was over, some of the men milled around affably and we socialized for a little while. We chatted about my job as a professor, about the possibility for book donations to the prison, and even about the Cubs' chances for the postseason. I packed up my things, feeling good about the changes I had made, and with a warm sense of accomplishment for a job well done. Perhaps I had bridged the gap between us after all. As we parted ways, however, I watched them file back into the prison through the side door, and the flush of success I felt was once again tinged with a dim sense of guilt about my ability to go free while they remained confined. I didn't know precisely where the prisoners had to go—presumably their cells, or maybe to a common area inside—but their gloomy re-entry into the prison depths presented such a stark contrast to my UAB students' customary optimism when leaving the classroom that I began to feel a mild sense of panic. I was more eager than I should have been to get out of there and back to my family, so that I had to restrain myself from running rather than walking across the prison yard to the gate that led to the outside world.

The next morning, as I prepared to scan and submit the prisoners' attendance sheet to the Office of Student Learning, I took a moment to look over their names. Their unique signatures—a cursive name in red ink, a penciled name in all capitals, another in crabbed and shaky print—had a kind of pathos that touched me. After their names, each had also written his prison identification code—six numbers, followed by a letter, then another two digit number. I spent half an hour or so looking these up in the searchable Donaldson database to connect names with faces and found that next to their booking photo was listed each prisoner's offense, the sentencing date, and the sentence itself (the database is in the public domain).<sup>6</sup> Most of them, I found, had done heinous things. The

older professorial-looking man who shuffled to the water fountain was serving a life sentence for multiple counts of sodomy, rape, and sexual abuse of a minor. The man who had assiduously read not just the story I sent, but also a variety of other materials he had somehow found about the temperance movement, was arrested for the brutal murder of two rival gang members. (I googled his name and found the story of his crime in the newspaper. He beat them both to death with a baseball bat.) The two younger men whispering together in the class had been found guilty, respectively, of shooting a convenience store clerk during a robbery and stabbing a man to death over a botched drug deal. Virtually every one of them had committed a violent, senseless, and horrific crime. I was particularly curious about one man in class who stood out to me. He had an almost adolescent face, and while he never spoke there was something striking about how attuned he was both to my lecture and to the other men's ideas. He seemed preternaturally observant, like an uneasy cat. He was in prison because he had strangled to death a retired school teacher in 1994 when he was fifteen years old. He has been locked away since before he could legally drive a car, and he will never have the chance for parole. Donaldson will be his life, as it will for about half the men whose names and numbers I searched. My curiosity about their crimes gave way rather quickly to a feeling of hopelessness. I felt sordid about looking them up in the first place, and saddened about the senselessness of it all.

I am aware, of course, that the title of this section of *J19* is "Pleasure Reading," but I suppose what I have been trying to express is that teaching at Donaldson does not bring me pleasure in the usual sense of the word. I volunteered there because I wanted to bring some form of joy and intellectual enrichment to a population that our society has written off as irredeemable, but I found instead that the gulf between us was more difficult to overcome than I had anticipated. I believe all people have an element of goodness in them, but I can also, at some level, sympathize with the sentiment that some crimes are beyond forgiveness, and that their perpetrators do not "deserve" happiness or enrichment in their lives because of their actions. I must admit that if someone I loved were one of their victims, I would probably feel incensed about a professor feeling good about himself for teaching there. I have made the choice to live with this ambivalence without trying to resolve it; as a friend and fellow academic put it, we desperately want to believe that "learning and intelligence are somehow safeguards against our worst impulses," and that the boundary between "us" and "them" is clear, stable, and dura-

ble. The reality, for me at least, is much more nebulous, which perhaps accounts for some of the uneasiness I felt during and after my time teaching at the prison.

If I feel a sense of psychological vertigo about the disconnect between my compassion for the men at Donaldson on the one hand, and my shock about the terrible things they have done on the other, I feel even less secure about why I chose to teach there in the first place, which brings me back (by way of conclusion) to Tommo and *Typee*. One topic I discuss with my UAB students when I teach Melville's novel is how the notion of a "peep at Polynesian life," as the subtitle suggests the book will offer, functions as a thematic trope. Tommo observes and interacts with the Typee as if he's privy to a Polynesian peep show. He is a voyeur and a cultural tourist, and in describing their lives as a sustained form of uninhibited freedom, or worse, as a running absurdity—their days as an "often-interrupted nap," or their weeks of delight with the "pop-guns" he fashions for them out of bamboo (145), or even their spiritual beliefs that he ridicules as primitive and child-like—he reveals himself to be, perhaps, the greatest absurdity of all: an ugly American on an island safari, with little capacity for self-reflection, whose "observations" are belied by smug cultural ignorance.

It is important to recognize, as well, that for Tommo and his readers, the pleasures of the freedom he experiences with the Typee are tenuous. His utopian vision can only exist as such when they seem a harmonious part of the valley's pastoral landscape, or benevolent subordinates in his personal fantasy. Once the Typee are revealed to be subjects themselves, or worse, once they exhibit signs of malevolence or duplicity or even independent personhood, the freedom Tommo thinks he enjoys quickly becomes an uneasy form of captivity. Tommo's portrayal of life with the Typee helps us to see how fantasies of paradise are often predicated on the facile idea that another culture can serve as a site for personal liberation, an exotic realm of otherness that allows "us" to return, cleansed and redeemed, to the lives we left behind.

I worry at some level that my excursions into Donaldson make me a bit like Tommo, busily pursuing my own personal peep show. Why, if not for voyeuristic pleasure, did I spend so much time googling the inmates' names? I included this detail in my essay because I wanted to contrast my feelings of camaraderie with the men at Donaldson with the reality of the horrible things they had done to be in prison. I felt a kinship with these men after my talk, but that kinship also felt sickening in a way after I read about their crimes, like the lines between "felon" and

“me” were uncannily blurred. Was I not also like Tommo in that I, too, felt a sense of urgency to escape, a desperate need to re-establish boundaries that were becoming altogether too ambiguous? Finally, in a broader and perhaps more damning way, why would I think others would find my experiences teaching at a prison noteworthy or interesting if not for their “dangerous” or exotic undertones, just as Tommo creates tension through his own thinly veiled anxiety about the possibility of cannibalism among the Typee?

I want to believe that my perspective about the lives these men lead is not fueled by ignorance or condescension, or worse, by the idea that teaching at Donaldson somehow makes me a more interesting person to my friends and colleagues in the “real” world. And above all I don’t want to homogenize and then appropriate their lives as “prison inmates” as part of my own narrative of personal growth, as Tommo does with the Typee. At the same time, I know that to be good at my job—at UAB and at Donaldson—I must take care not to be too careful, for that can lead to paralysis. Sometimes it seems to me that we academics are afraid to offend, and consequently we spend too much time speaking to each other and not enough to the world, our politically resonant scholarship just so much preaching to the choir. So despite my conflicted feelings about the experience, I will volunteer to teach again at Donaldson next fall. I don’t know whether some crimes are unforgivable, or whether the capacity for violence is part of us all or restricted to a few, or even whether my choice to teach at a prison is altruistic or selfish. But I do know that the men in Alabama’s prisons are human, and that most humans have at least a modicum of goodness in them that merits dignity and respect, so that’s what I will focus on.

## Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Typee*, volume 1 of the Northwestern-Newberry Edition of the *Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1968), 81, 151, 152, 150. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

2. For more on UAB’s partnership with Donaldson, see Beth Shelburne, “The Prison’s Professors: A Special Report,” *WBRC Fox News on Your Side*, last modified December 22, 2015, <http://www.wbrc.com/story/30802030/the-prisons-professors-a-special-report>. Ms. Shelburne has done remarkable work bringing to light the shameful conditions at Alabama’s prisons.

3. For more on connections between tattooing and early American theories about skin pigmentation and race, see Samuel Otter, *Melville’s Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

4. Maria Lamas, *The Glass: or, The Trials of Helen More* (Philadelphia: Martin E. Harmstead, 1849).

5. Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

6. “Inmate Search,” Alabama Department of Corrections, accessed October 22, 2017, <http://www.doc.state.al.us>.